

## Sarah Wheatcroft: Service for the Dead

By: Ardis E. Parshall - October 19, 2009

The page in the record of burials in the churchyard of St. Thomas's church in [New] Brampton, Derbyshire, England is unremarkable: There, on the third line, is recorded the burial of Sarah Wheatcroft, of Walton, Derbyshire, on 10 March 1850, age 20 years. Frederick Arnold, the curate, read the service in place of John Berridge Jebb, the second vicar of the then 18-year-old church (the "incumbent" mentioned in quotations below), but that was nothing unusual – the curate conducted many more burials than his superior.[1] Nothing about this ordinary record hints at the controversy over Sarah's burial nor the role it played in cementing the religious freedoms of Mormons in this corner of old England.

Sarah was born on 10 February 1830 at Brampton, daughter of James and Ann Wheatcroft, and christened six weeks later (19 March) at the church in nearby Chesterfield, Derbyshire – a new stone church with Gothic windows and a massive square tower, to be known as St. Thomas's church, was under construction at Brampton but wouldn't be completed for another two years. The Brampton/Walton/Chesterfield neighborhood was visited early by LDS missionaries, and a small but permanent branch was established there. [2]

1841 was an eventful year for the Wheatcroft family. Ann was baptized as a Latter-day Saint on 4 January 1841. A census enumerator captured a last glimpse of the family together that spring in an entry showing James Wheatcroft, manual laborer, living with Ann and their children James (age 20), Ann (15), and Sarah (10). James died later that summer of 1841. [3]

The Chesterfield branch membership record lists Ann Wheatcroft as the first baptism of 1841. [4] The Sarah Wheatcroft shown here, however, is not "our" Sarah; how that Sarah, born in 1809, might be connected to our family is not yet known. "Our" Sarah was baptized on 7 January 1845, meaning that she had been a member just over five years when she died in the first week of March 1850.

A delegation of Latter-day Saints called at St. Thomas's church to make arrangements for Sarah's burial on Sunday, March 10th. A day or two later, the Rev. Jebb himself – described by his daughter-in-law as "a person decidedly above average in ability who held strong and settled opinions on life, religion, and other leading questions" [5] – called on Ann Wheatcroft and told her – in his strong and settled way – that inasmuch as Sarah had been

baptized as a Latter-day Saint, he would not allow her to be buried in his churchyard. However, he said, if Ann would “get her buried elsewhere,” Jebb would pay the burial fees himself. Ann protested. St. Thomas’s was nearest and most convenient for the bereaved mother, and by law, her friends insisted, the vicar must allow the burial. They argued back and forth, and finally Jebb left, declaring that he would write to his Bishop at Lichfield, Staffordshire for support in refusing burial.

Word spread, and soon the district was buzzing with speculation over who would win this showdown, the minister, with his strong and settled opinions, or the equally determined Mormons, with the law of the land on their side.

On Sunday, 10 March, the Saints of Brampton held their usual services, followed by an afternoon funeral service for Sarah Wheatcroft. A little before 6:00 that evening, they left their meeting rooms on Factory Street, and the modest funeral procession, with branch members singing a hymn, headed on foot toward St. Thomas’s church and its burying ground. “A considerable number of persons,” according to the Derbyshire Courier, “hundreds” by Mormon estimate, [6] either watched the procession pass or followed it to the churchyard.

They found the gate locked, but had “scarcely halted when the incumbent appeared in his canonicals, and taking off his hat, proceeded to read the following protest”:

In the name of God, I, John Berridge Jebb, incumbent of the district of St. Thomas’s, Brampton, do hereby solemnly protest against the use of the burial service of the Church of England in this case; and I do declare that it is only because I am compelled by the law of the land that I allow a member of the community of Mormons, or Latter-day Saints, to be interred according to the rites of the church in the churchyard of St. Thomas’s, Brampton; and I further declare that I cannot knowingly officiate in any future interment of the same kind without doing violence to my conscience.

Jebb told the crowd that if any wished to hear the full grounds for his objections, he would address them immediately in the nearby schoolroom. Donning his hat, Jebb strode off in the direction of the schoolhouse.

“The behaviour of the Mormons during the reading of the protest and at the service was decorous and proper,” noted the gentile journalist. The curate, Mr. Arnold, stepped forward

and read the rite of the Church of England over the grave of Sarah Wheatcroft, Latter-day Saint. The Mormons had not asked for that rite, but neither did they prevent it, although, acknowledged the newspaper, “ it appears from the subsequent representations of one of their body, that they do not desire the service of the church at the burial of their dead; but only the privilege of burying in the churchyard.”

The Courier’s reporter may have learned this information from a local elder. That “representation” was certainly more restrained than the editorial comment appended by Orson Pratt to the report printed in the Millennial Star:

We will take this opportunity to inform the Rev. Mr. Jebb and his compeers, that the Latter-day Saints do not feel themselves under the least obligation to them for repeating the “service for the dead” over the body of a Latter-day Saint; nor do we feel to object to its being done; for we are well assured, that it will neither benefit nor injure the deceased. All we ask, is the privilege of burying our dead in places where the bodies are the least likely to be disturbed. It is truly a choice between two evils; for the ground that is professedly consecrated as a resting place for the dead is not, at all times, exempt from the rude grasp of the most disgusting avarice.

And thus was a young Latter-day Saint woman laid to rest on the grounds of St. Thomas’s church, Brampton. Neither the local newspaper nor the Millennial Star bothered to name her or her grieving mother.

They are Sarah Wheatcroft (1830-1850), and her mother Ann (—) Wheatcroft (1803-\_\_\_\_).

—